

## 2.15.2008 - Dr. Carter G. Woodson: West Virginia's Father of Black History

African Americans continue to contribute to our nation and to make enormous strides, despite having to overcome unspeakable hardship and indefensible prejudice throughout history. As we once again commemorate the contribution African Americans have made to our Nation during Black History Month, it is a perfect time to reflect on the accomplishments of so many black leaders who are intimately connected to the Mountain State.

The theme of Black History Month this year is "Carter G. Woodson and the Origins of Multiculturalism." Few realize, however, that we would not be celebrating this special month, were it not for the "Father of Black History"-one of West Virginia's own-Carter G. Woodson.

Woodson, a son of Virginia slaves who settled in West Virginia, worked in coal mines near Huntington until he could afford a college education. After establishing a successful academic career at both West Virginia State College and Howard University, he dedicated himself to bringing to life the story of black Americans missing from many of our history books. In 1926, he helped establish "Negro History Week," precursor to the Black History Month we celebrate today.

As a renowned educator and scholar, Woodson authored numerous scholarly books on the positive contributions of Blacks to the development of America and laid the foundation for rethinking American identity as a blending of many cultures. We should take pride that this year's theme honors a truly outstanding southern West Virginian and his pioneering efforts to recognize the history of accomplishments that African Americans have contributed to our Nation and our State.

Carter G. Woodson is, of course, just one of many strong African Americans from southern West Virginia who have made a difference to our Nation. We can add to this list the countless men and women who worked long hours for less pay to provide for a better future for their children, the many men and women who heroically fought and continue to fight for our liberties in the armed forces, the men and women who through their compassion and quiet strength, were role models by which we all can live.

Last November, I was honored to present two such heroes, Tuskegee Airmen William Hill and Earl Rudisill, with the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest and most distinguished award bestowed by the Congress. This recognition, given to those that

embody  
the best qualities of American heritage, was both much-deserved and long-over  
due.

Like many West Virginians  
before them, William Hill and Earl Rudisill answered our Nation's call to arms  
at an early age. But unlike most  
veterans, they were fighting two wars: One on the battlefields of Europe, and the other in the hearts and minds of our  
citizens at home. As Tuskegee Airmen,  
these brave men offered to risk their lives for our country's freedom, knowing  
very well that, at that time, our country offered them very little freedom in  
return. Despite this disparity, they  
marched head first into adversity and brought hope and pride to a generation of  
African Americans that helped end an era of prejudice.

Today, southern West Virginians are also deeply  
indebted to our African American educators, folks like Bluefield State  
President Albert Walker; Maurice Cooley, Director of African American Programs  
at Marshall University; Betty Jane  
Cleckley, Vice President for Marshall University Multicultural Affairs; Loretta  
Young, Vice President for Development at Concord University; and Roslyn Clark-Artis,  
Chief Advancement Officer at Mountain State University.

Too often, the history of black Americans is not  
fully taught or remembered. With the  
indomitable spirit of Dr. Carter G. Woodson and new leaders such Senator and presidential  
candidate Barack Obama, African Americans in southern West Virginia and across the country are  
making great progress. Let us take this Black  
History Month to celebrate the African-American contributions to the greatness  
of West Virginia  
and to commend those carrying on this proud tradition of service today.